

FOR THE BIRDS

Shelby Stephenson

I was gotten my father said  
from "pulling out not soon enough"  
and that was enough to get me started:

said my ears were so big he put me  
on the top doorstep to see if I would  
fly the long swallow up the shadow-grown

loft of my crib, growing among blackbirds  
(four and twenty), crows cawing through  
the duckwalking years, the burrowing owl's

whooooo my ears knew the sound  
in the fencerow *that lonesome whippoorwill he*  
*sounds too blue to fly* while the front stoop

my father set me on fell down every time  
someone placed a foot on the bottomstep,  
unnailed like everything else, the humpthroated

fishhawk loping on to whatever ruffed grouse  
could work peripheries:  
the mourning doves settle their wings like shields,

their sight on me: fly on, fly on — you nighthawks,  
orioles, ospreys — oh the diving  
die-does of grebes and the died-apples

(my father called them) of the apple orchard  
(they would flop down as if broken-winged  
and swing up and out through the trees, a rotting

apple in their beaks): fly on  
purple martin for the insects over the house  
Grandpa William made for you

and set high on a pole over the garden  
of black earth at the Old Place, my  
red-bellied woodpecker-self in the fall sun, haying,

my skin blistering, rose-breasted,  
road-running, rough-winged, redheaded,  
red-throated, laughing at the common snipe

I am, the times I have been left holding the bag,  
times I have seen the wide net I pitched go  
up in a lark of knots, drunk in

a flutter of wings, my sparse hair  
tickling like new bird stubble: sparrows fly round  
my head twelve out of twenty-four through one ear

and out the other and they warble as they fly:  
blue coots whistle, bleat, and groan  
O if warble could find the hermit

blackthroated commonwealth of noise  
what dominion of ugly happy tyranny would befall  
those birds pitching on the top doorstep.